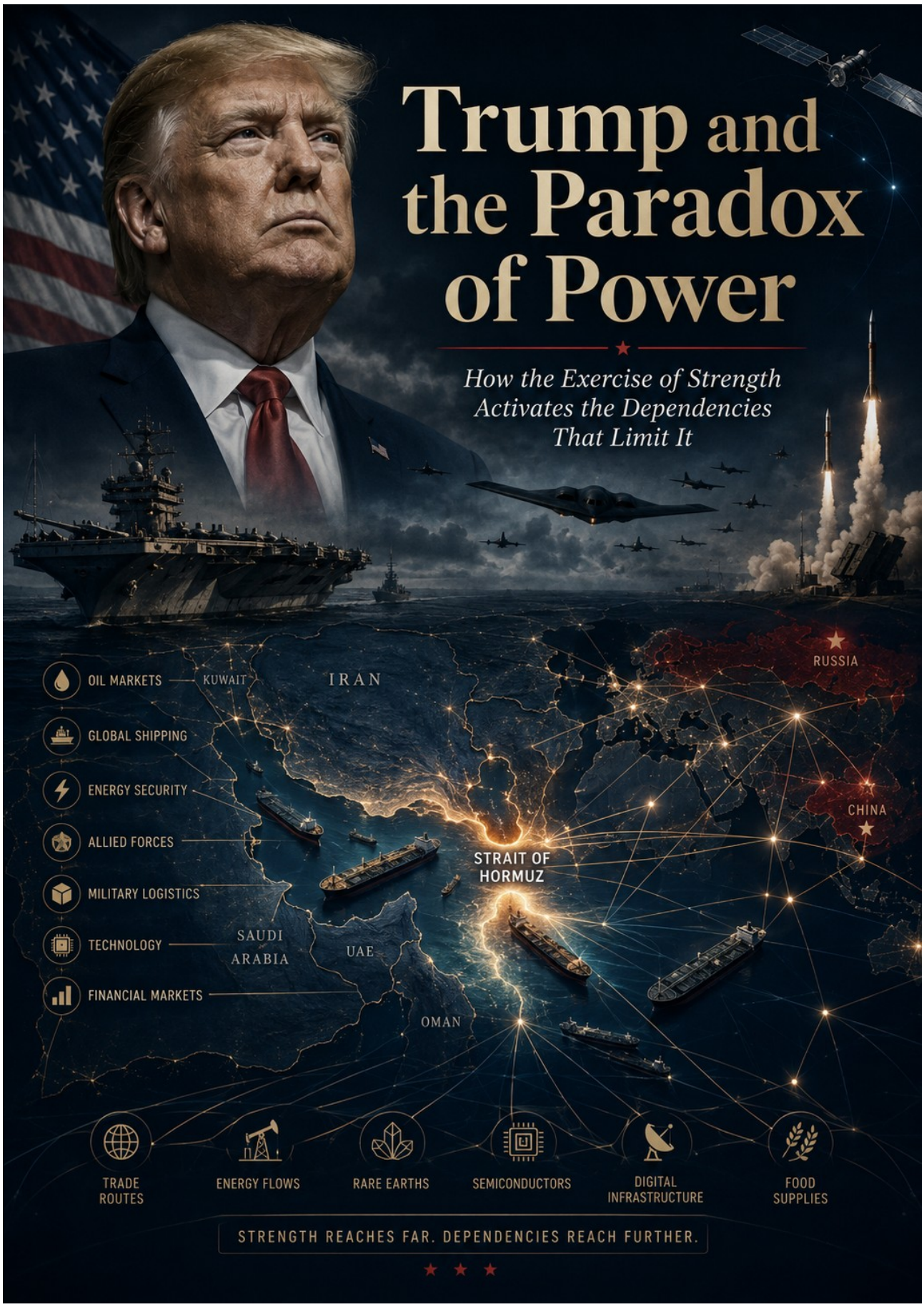
Trump and the Paradox of Power
How the Exercise of Strength Activates the Dependencies That Limit It
OIL MARKETS
GLOBAL SHIPPING
ENERGY SECURITY
ALLIED FORCES
MILITARY LOGISTICS
TECHNOLOGY
FINANCIAL MARKETS
KUWAIT
IRAN
SAUDI ARABIA
UAE
OMAN
STRAIT OF HORMUZ
RUSSIA
CHINA
TRADE ROUTES
ENERGY FLOWS
RARE EARTHS
SEMICONDUCTORS
DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE
FOOD SUPPLIES
STRENGTH REACHES FAR. DEPENDENCIES REACH FURTHER.

The United States is vastly more powerful than Iran. There is almost no conventional measure by which this is seriously disputed. The United States possesses a military capable of operating across the planet, enormous economic resources, intelligence networks, satellites, naval forces, long-range aircraft and alliances extending across much of the world. Iran is a regional power with a much smaller economy, decades of sanctions behind it and no realistic possibility of competing symmetrically with American military power.

And yet, after inflicting enormous damage on Iran, the United States confronts a peculiar fact. Iran remains capable of imposing costs far beyond its own size. The Strait of Hormuz has become the most visible expression of this. Iran cannot defeat the United States conventionally, but it can disrupt shipping, frighten insurers, disturb energy markets, threaten regional infrastructure and force countries thousands of kilometres away to calculate the consequences.

This is the paradox.

A stronger power can weaken an adversary while simultaneously increasing the importance of the few forms of leverage that adversary still possesses.

But something else happens as well. The exercise of American power activates dependencies that were less

visible while that power remained unused. Military operations require bases, fuel, munitions, logistics and political support. Prolonged conflict makes industrial capacity and weapons inventories matter. Disruption in Hormuz turns shipping companies, insurers and energy markets into participants. Commitments in Europe and Asia become relevant because resources devoted to one theatre cannot be infinitely duplicated in another.

Before the confrontation, these dependencies already existed.

The use of power made them consequential.

Donald Trump did not invent this problem. Great powers have encountered versions of it throughout history. But his approach to Iran has made it unusually visible because his understanding of international power has so consistently emphasized pressure, dominance and escalation. From the “maximum pressure” campaign of his first presidency to the present conflict, the underlying proposition has remained remarkably stable: apply sufficient pressure and the opponent will eventually conclude that resistance costs more than submission.

The problem is that strength does not act upon an isolated opponent.

It enters a system.

And the system moves.

The Narrow Place

The Strait of Hormuz is an almost absurd demonstration of how geography can interfere with military arithmetic. A large share of the world's petroleum trade normally passes through a relatively narrow waterway between Iran and Oman. The global economy is enormous. The passage is small. Iran sits beside it.

When transit through Hormuz becomes dangerous, the consequences travel far beyond the battlefield. Tanker movements decline, insurance costs rise, energy markets react and countries with no direct involvement in the conflict discover that they have acquired an interest in its outcome. Even after severe military damage, safe commercial passage itself can become something over which Iran possesses leverage.

This reveals an important distinction between **capability and leverage**.

The United States possesses incomparably greater military capability. It can strike targets Iran cannot reliably defend and project force at a scale Iran cannot reproduce. But leverage is relational. It depends not simply upon what one actor possesses, but upon what another actor needs.

Iran does not have to become stronger than the United States.

It has to discover where American strength depends upon vulnerable systems.

Hormuz is one such dependency. Regional bases are another. Allied governments, energy prices, missile inventories, air-defence systems, shipping insurance and domestic political patience can all become relevant once military power is actually exercised.

This produces a strange reversal. The more extensive the operation becomes, the more dependencies it can activate.

Send bombers and logistics matter.

Threaten shipping and insurance matters.

Prolong the war and ammunition production matters.

Raise energy prices and domestic politics matters.

Commit forces to one region and commitments elsewhere matter.

The military relationship may remain spectacularly unequal while the political relationship becomes increasingly complicated.

Geography does not care who has the larger defence budget.

Neither does interdependence.

Power Enters Time

There is another distinction that military arithmetic often obscures.

Power looks different depending upon whether it is **possessed, exercised or sustained**.

Possessed power can be counted at a particular moment. Aircraft, ships, missiles, bases, industrial capacity and money can be placed in columns and compared.

But war converts stocks into flows.

Once power is exercised, missiles are consumed, aircraft require maintenance, fuel moves, personnel tire and equipment wears. Sustained power therefore depends not merely upon what a state possesses, but upon the rates at which resources can be replaced, repaired, transported, financed and politically supported.

Military power has always existed in time. War makes its temporal structure impossible to ignore.

Once military power is exercised, replenishment rates matter. Maintenance matters. Industrial bottlenecks matter. Personnel fatigue matters. Political patience matters. Other commitments matter. The question is no longer simply how much force a state can unleash, but how long it can

continue doing so while the surrounding system adapts.

This gives weaker actors another dimension in which to compete.

Iran cannot make its military equal to America's. But it can attempt to lengthen the confrontation, increase the number of systems affected by it and make duration itself expensive.

Can disruption continue longer than markets tolerate?

Can inventories be consumed faster than industry replaces them?

Can political support erode?

Can other theatres begin demanding the same resources?

Can allies become less enthusiastic as costs accumulate?

A weaker actor may be unable to compete with a stronger one in destructive capacity while still competing through time.

Power enters a system.

Once it enters the system, it enters time.

Once it enters time, dependencies become visible.

What Pressure Teaches

Trump's first-term policy of maximum pressure was intended to confront Iran with escalating economic costs until Tehran altered its behaviour. The pressure certainly hurt Iran, but pressure does not operate upon passive material. States adapt. Industries reorganize, sanctions-evasion networks develop, military doctrines change and political institutions learn to function under conditions of permanent hostility.

An adversary repeatedly taught that normal relations are unavailable may eventually organize itself around the assumption that resistance is not temporary but structural. The question then changes. Iran no longer needs to ask how it could possibly equal American power. It asks what forms of power remain available to a state that cannot compete conventionally.

Missiles, drones, proxies, cyber operations, shipping routes, energy infrastructure, geography and time all offer possible answers.

This is where coercive power encounters its own consequences. The stronger the pressure becomes, the greater the incentive to discover ways of making pressure expensive. Once those methods have been found, additional coercion may increase rather than diminish the importance of using them.

The stronger actor can then enter a trap partly of its own construction. Push harder and the costs rise. Stop pushing and retreat becomes politically visible. Negotiate and the adversary may obtain concessions precisely because resistance proved costly.

Power has produced resistance.

Resistance has discovered dependencies.

Dependencies have created leverage.

And Iran is not the only actor learning from the process.

The Other Audience

Every exercise of great-power strength has at least two audiences.

The first is the target.

The second is everyone watching.

When the United States fights Iran, China watches. Russia watches. American allies watch. Regional powers watch. Smaller states that may someday find themselves under pressure from Washington watch as well.

They are not merely asking who is winning. They are observing what American power can accomplish, what it requires and what happens around it when it is used.

China does not need to watch American aircraft operating over Iran and conclude that the United States is weak. That would be an extraordinarily strange reading of the evidence. American conventional military capability remains formidable, and Beijing can observe long-range operations, intelligence systems, precision weapons, logistics and the ability to project force far from the continental United States.

But China can observe something else at the same time.

It can observe the difference between **military superiority and political control**.

Iran does not need to destroy every American aircraft or defeat the American fleet. It can survive, impose costs and exploit dependencies. It can transform a military confrontation into an energy problem, an insurance problem, a shipping problem, an alliance problem and eventually a political problem.

For China, that lesson may matter far beyond the Persian Gulf.

The relevant question in a possible future confrontation is not simply whether the United States possesses superior weapons. It is what dependencies become activated once those weapons are used. How long can operations be sustained? Which munitions become scarce? Which supply

chains matter? Which allies participate? Which hesitate? How much economic disruption will populations tolerate? What other American commitments become harder to maintain?

Iran becomes an unwilling laboratory.

America demonstrates what it can do.

Iran demonstrates what doing it costs.

China gets to study both.

Power Becomes Data

This produces another paradox.

Unused power contains uncertainty.

An adversary knows that the United States possesses enormous military capabilities but cannot know exactly how they will be used, how effectively they will perform, how long Washington will sustain an operation or which costs will eventually become politically unacceptable.

Once power is exercised, some of that uncertainty disappears.

Exercised power consumes uncertainty.

Power becomes data.

Other states can observe which weapons work, which

systems fail, which resources are consumed quickly, which allies cooperate, which economic disruptions produce concern and which forms of asymmetric resistance remain effective.

Before the confrontation, these are estimates.

During the confrontation, some become observations.

A show of strength is therefore also a public stress test.

It demonstrates capability.

But it reveals dependency.

It says: look what I can do.

And at the same time: here is how I do it, what it requires, what it consumes and which parts of the system begin to strain when I continue doing it.

This does not mean that demonstrating power necessarily weakens deterrence. Successful military action can strengthen it enormously. The important point is that every demonstration reveals more than the demonstrating power intends.

The Trump administration set out to demonstrate the consequences of resisting American power.

In doing so, it has also demonstrated the consequences of exercising American power.

That second lesson may prove just as important as the first.

Russia Watches Differently

Russia occupies another position in the system.

Moscow does not need to learn precisely the same lessons as Beijing because it is already engaged in a prolonged confrontation with the West. For Russia, an American conflict with Iran can create opportunities simply by activating American dependencies elsewhere.

Attention is finite.

Weapons inventories are finite.

Military deployments are finite.

Political concentration is finite.

If American resources are committed heavily to the Middle East, their availability elsewhere becomes a question. If conflict raises global energy prices, a major energy exporter may benefit. If Washington becomes preoccupied with one crisis, actors involved in another crisis adjust their calculations.

This does not mean Russia automatically benefits from every American difficulty in the Middle East. Instability can threaten Russian interests too, and American military

effectiveness may itself be something Moscow finds alarming.

The more important point is structural.

When a great power acts against one adversary, it changes the environment for every other actor.

The United States may intend an operation to weaken Iran. The same operation can alter Russian revenues, Chinese strategic calculations, Gulf security arrangements, European energy costs, American weapons inventories and allied perceptions of American priorities.

The effects therefore divide in different directions.

Iran discovers leverage.

Russia discovers opportunities.

China acquires information.

One exercise of power produces three different strategic consequences.

Trump pushes against one part of the system.

The pressure travels through the network.

The Mistake of the Pyramid

Perhaps the deeper problem lies in how power is imagined.

We tend to picture it vertically, as a pyramid. The strongest actor sits at the top and progressively weaker actors occupy the levels below. From this perspective, resistance appears largely to be a problem of insufficient pressure. If a weaker actor refuses to comply, the stronger actor simply needs to demonstrate more convincingly how unequal the relationship really is.

But the contemporary world resembles a network more than a pyramid.

Energy moves through shipping routes. Manufacturing depends upon supply chains. Money passes through financial systems. Information travels through satellites, cables and data centres. Military operations depend upon bases, allies, logistics, industrial production, fuel and political support. Every powerful state is embedded within systems that magnify its strength while simultaneously creating dependencies.

The important point is not that dependency makes power illusory.

Quite the opposite.

Complex systems of dependency are what make modern power possible.

An aircraft carrier is powerful because an immense logistical network sustains it. An alliance is powerful because states commit resources to one another. Global financial systems amplify influence because millions of actors participate in them. Satellites matter because they are connected to communications networks, ground stations, software, energy systems and industrial capacity.

Dependency produces strength.

But every system that magnifies power also creates conditions upon which that power depends.

Networks produce power.

They also produce chokepoints.

In such a system, a smaller actor need not overpower a larger one. It can search for the point where the larger actor's dependencies become narrow.

Hormuz is a literal chokepoint, but the principle extends much further. Semiconductor production, rare-earth processing, undersea cables, financial clearing systems, energy infrastructure and critical supply chains can all transform apparently unequal relationships into something more complicated.

This is why raw strength alone becomes an unreliable predictor of political control.

Before a confrontation begins, we may compare America with Iran and conclude that the relationship is overwhelmingly unequal.

Once the confrontation begins, the relevant system is no longer simply America versus Iran.

It is America, Iran, Hormuz, Gulf states, energy markets, shipping companies, insurers, weapons inventories, allies, domestic politics, Russia, China and time.

The exercise of power changes the unit of analysis.

This may be the central paradox.

Power carries dependencies within it.

Many remain inconspicuous while nothing is testing them.

A navy depends upon fuel and logistics, but those dependencies do not dominate political discussion while the ships remain in port. A military depends upon ammunition production, but production rates become politically consequential only when stocks are being consumed. An economy depends upon shipping and insurance, but that dependence becomes visible when ships stop moving.

Using power activates these relationships.

The greater the intervention, the more of the surrounding system may become relevant to whether the intervention succeeds.

The strongest actor therefore cannot simply calculate how much damage it can inflict.

It must calculate what the act of inflicting that damage will activate.

What will the adversary do?

What will markets do?

What will allies do?

What will other great powers learn?

Which resources will become scarce?

Which dependencies will become chokepoints?

Which previously peripheral actors will suddenly acquire leverage?

And what happens if the confrontation lasts much longer than expected?

These are not secondary questions.

They are part of what power is.

The Trap of More

None of this means military power is useless. Deterrence is real. Some actors exploit weakness. Some threats cannot be negotiated away, and there are circumstances in which force prevents greater violence rather than producing it.

The mistake is turning coercion from one instrument of power into a complete theory of power.

If resistance always produces additional pressure, a relationship can become self-reinforcing. The stronger actor escalates because retreat appears to reward resistance. The weaker actor escalates because resistance appears to be the only mechanism capable of producing concessions. Each side then interprets the other's response as proof that its own previous behaviour was necessary.

The system learns escalation.

Simply stopping does not solve the problem either. If imposing sufficient costs automatically produces everything an adversary demands, then causing those costs becomes an attractive strategy. Restraint is not the same as unconditional retreat.

The problem is therefore not choosing between bombing and backing down.

It is finding a way to stop making pressure the only language available.

Architectural Power

Coercive power asks:

How can I make you do what I want?

There is another form of power worth considering.

Call it **architectural power**.

Architectural power asks:

How can I shape the system so that choices acceptable to me become increasingly attractive to you?

This is more than negotiation.

Architectural power is the capacity not merely to exert force within a system, but to shape the dependencies through which other actors make choices.

Alliances are architectural power.

Trade relationships can be architectural power.

Industrial capacity is architectural power.

Energy diversification is architectural power.

Alternative shipping routes are architectural power.

Security guarantees, financial access, sanctions relief, infrastructure, redundancy and economic integration can all become forms of architectural power.

Even deterrence belongs within the architecture when it changes the costs attached to particular choices.

The objective is not to abolish coercion. Architectural power still requires deterrence, verification and consequences. Agreements can be violated. States remain suspicious. Some actors will exploit opportunities whenever they find them.

But the objective changes.

Instead of attempting endlessly to overcome an adversary's will, the stronger actor attempts to alter the environment in which that will operates.

The difference is subtle but profound.

Coercive power says:

I will make resistance unbearable.

Architectural power says:

I will shape the available choices so that preserving an arrangement becomes more valuable than destroying it.

This can include reciprocal and reversible steps. One actor reduces behaviour producing danger; corresponding pressure is reduced. Further verifiable restraint produces further benefit. Renewed escalation reverses the concession.

Nobody has to trust anybody completely.

Trust can be replaced by sequence.

More importantly, neither side has to crawl.

The United States can say hostile behaviour was constrained. Iran can say pressure was reduced and its sovereignty preserved. Regional mediators can claim that a wider catastrophe was avoided. These accounts need not be identical.

Sometimes the cheapest concession in international politics is allowing the other side to give a different victory speech.

Transforming Dependency

Architectural power suggests something more ambitious than a negotiated pause.

If Iran's leverage comes partly from America's and the world's dependence upon safe passage through Hormuz, the long-term objective should not simply be to destroy Iran's capacity to interfere with the strait.

It should also be to change the structure of the dependency.

One side of that strategy is defensive.

Reduce the vulnerability of the system.

Diversify energy supplies. Build alternative routes. Increase industrial capacity. Maintain larger inventories where necessary. Avoid allowing a single chokepoint to carry disproportionate strategic weight.

But the other side is relational.

Can an open Hormuz become more valuable to Iran than a threatened Hormuz?

A state more deeply invested in regional trade, investment and energy arrangements acquires things it can lose. Stability becomes not merely something demanded by outsiders but something connected to its own interests.

This is incentive design rather than surrender.

The objective is not to create an Iran incapable of causing harm. No serious international system can depend upon making every potential adversary harmless. The objective is to construct relationships in which preserving the arrangement becomes more valuable than destroying it.

Dependency itself is not the enemy.

Modern power is built from dependencies.

The problem is how they are arranged.

A sophisticated great power therefore does not attempt the impossible task of eliminating dependency. It governs dependency.

It diversifies dangerous dependencies.

It strengthens useful ones.

It creates redundancy around chokepoints.

It increases the cost to adversaries of destroying systems from which they also benefit.

And it recognizes that some forms of interdependence can constrain hostility more effectively than repeated punishment.

A great power that understands only how to punish hostile behaviour may gradually create adversaries whose principal expertise is surviving punishment.

A great power capable of shaping dependencies can sometimes make cooperation more valuable than resistance.

That may be a more sophisticated expression of strength.

The Paradox of Power

Trump's approach to international politics has often rested upon a powerful intuition: strength produces respect, pressure produces concessions and credible escalation makes opponents reconsider their behaviour.

Sometimes it does.

The mistake is turning that intuition into a universal law.

Strength alone does not determine what happens once strength enters an interconnected world.

Power activates dependencies.

Pressure teaches adversaries.

Time exposes logistical limits.

War reveals capabilities and limitations.

Attacking one actor changes opportunities for others.

Markets reorganize.

Allies recalculate.

Military resources move.

Future adversaries take notes.

The consequences spread beyond the intended target.

This may be the history lesson confronting the Trump administration now. It set out to demonstrate the consequences of resisting American power. In doing so, it also exposed the dependencies activated when American power is exercised.

Iran discovered leverage.

Russia discovered opportunities.

China acquired information.

The United States discovered that destruction and control are not the same thing.

And the Strait of Hormuz remained narrow.

The aircraft carriers are enormous. The bombers cross continents. Satellites watch from orbit and missiles arrive with astonishing precision. Yet tankers still have to move through a particular stretch of water. Insurance companies still have to accept the risk. Allies still have interests of their own. Weapons still have to be manufactured. Voters still have to tolerate the costs. Other powers still watch.

Perhaps this is what the pyramid concealed.

Power is not a possession that can simply be accumulated and discharged against the world. It exists within

relationships, and those relationships contain dependencies. Some generate power. Some constrain it. Often they do both at once.

Most remain almost invisible until power is used.

Then they wake up.

The strongest state may therefore be not the one capable of applying the greatest pressure, but the one capable of anticipating, shaping and surviving what its pressure will activate.

Because every time power enters the world, it changes the conditions under which power will have to operate next.

And sometimes the first thing overwhelming strength reveals is everything it still depends upon.